



Common student problems with assessment during the transition to university: Support staff perspectives, insights, and recommendations

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Executive summary

The transition from secondary school to university is a challenging phase in a student's life. This change is often characterised by major shifts in how the learning environment and academic tasks are structured, the nature of information that students are expected to master, and how this knowledge is to be assessed. For success with university-level assessments, the first-year student must make use of available resources; however, a significant percentage of students struggle in identifying and utilising these resources. This is a vulnerability which could lead to short- and long-term problems for the individual learner, classroom, institution, and greater community.

Results from this project highlight common problems that first-year New Zealand university students encounter with regards to assessment. These primarily include issues around (1) task resources (i.e., what am I supposed to *do*?); (2) knowledge resources (i.e., what am I supposed to *understand*?); and, (3) social and cultural resources (i.e., where do I go when...?). Based on support staff perspectives and insights into these common problems, it is recommended that learners (and their families), lecturers, support staff and institutions consider the following elements as priorities to improve university assessment practices for first-year students:

- Sharing accurate expectations about university
- Enhancing solid transferrable skills
- Developing strong discipline-specific skills
- Designing and communicating clear, effective assessments
- Cultivating a supportive learning climate

1. Introduction and background

Academic success, retention, and progression toward graduation are important for students and universities alike, with academic assessments as a key metric. From institutional and lecturer perspectives, academic tasks may be viewed as essential measures that provide valuable insight into student learning and teaching effectiveness. First-year students, however, are likely to view assessment in a less positive light for a variety of reasons. Contemporary research in tertiary education (e.g., Armstrong & Sanson, 2012; Hendry & Jukic, 2014) has demonstrated that many students—particularly in the transition from secondary school to first-year university—struggle to understand assessment tasks, the quality of work expected, and the academic processes of the university. This may be due to several reasons, including: different assessment methods used in secondary school (e.g., given second chances, more lenient classroom rubrics, quick feedback on returned work; Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordstrom, 2009; Guskey, 2006), individual attitudes and expectations toward learning and assessments (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, & McKenzie, 2009), the extent to which students have gained scholarly skills in preparation for university (e.g., exposure to academic literature, essay writing, time management, critical thinking and analysis, communication skills; Hooker & Brand, 2010), and cultural background (e.g. MacFarlane, 2010; 2013).

The aims of the project were twofold: (1) to identify common problems that first-year university students encounter with assessment; and, (2) to develop practical, cost-effective ways in which students, lecturers, support staff, and institutions could mitigate these problems. Whereas educational research on assessment is traditionally viewed from the individual student perspective in aggregate, there has been limited attention to the voice from university support staff. This is an empirical gap worth filling, as support staff teams have a wealth of knowledge with regards to first-year students and assessment concerns. First, these teams interact regularly with first-year students at the frontlines and can recognise recurring trends with regards to assessment. Second, university support staff collaborate frequently with academic staff and are usually in a position to describe assessment issues occurring at course or departmental levels. Lastly, these teams are aware of institutional trends and changes in assessment policy and practices across the university. Ultimately, to help first-year university students become more successful with their assessments, university support staff is an indispensable source of knowledge.

We focus on assessments in large first-year classes, in part because the contrast with the small-class learning environment common in secondary school is most stark. Ensuring that students encounter as few problems as possible with assessment in these types of classes has the largest implications both for student success and for support staff workloads. Results of the current research will be helpful for several audiences. First, the findings will benefit New Zealand secondary schools (their students and families/whānau) by providing greater information about the nature of the first-year transition and ways to prepare for success at university. Second, results will be useful to university lecturers by offering recommendations that employ effective assessment practices while being mindful of the most common student pitfalls with academic tasks. Third, results will benefit New Zealand universities, as knowledge about ways to improve its academic processes and policies can help to attain institutional goals of student learning, recruitment and retention.

2. Literature review

Assessments are the primary means by which a university determines academic success for students. Defined as the collection of diverse information sources that measure student knowledge and understanding as a result of educational experiences (Huba & Freed, 2000),

assessments are central to day-to-day teaching and learning in tertiary institutions. It is thus of primary importance that students have the opportunity to demonstrate their skill and knowledge, and that the corresponding assessments are designed in a manner that accurately measure the intended learning objectives. For assessments to be effective and valid, concurrence also must exist between how students and academic staff interpret such tasks, meaning that instructors and students need to work from a common set of expectations.

Potential benefits of assessments are often overshadowed by a variety of concerns. For instance, students' writing proficiency is regularly viewed as a significant problem from the perspective of lecturer as well as a struggle from the perspective of the student (Krause, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Despite such issues, mitigation is rarely taken from a systemic, university-wide approach. This is alarming when taking into consideration 1 in 4 students in Australia (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) and 1 in 5 students in New Zealand (Pearl, Waikato Times, 2013, August 1; Sampson, 2015) will not persist with their university studies. Accordingly, many tertiary institutions are intensifying efforts for first-year students to improve academic success and reduce dropout rates (Jansen & Suhre, 2010; Yorke & Longden, 2004). To achieve these outcomes, it is crucial that common problems with university assessment among first-year students are prioritised, identified, and addressed through cost-effective, university-wide solutions to benefit from economies of scale as well as university-wide consistency.

2.1 Resources for Student Assessment

One of the most commonly used approaches for university-level assessment relies on written communication as the primary source of evaluating student knowledge and understanding. Specifically, written assessments are a form of academic task in which a student is expected to employ a certain type of text (e.g., essay, laboratory report, case analysis, etc.) and present a well-composed answer to a specific question (or set of questions). In university courses, written academic tasks rely on a system of accountability and evaluation wherein the lecturer uses their disciplinary expertise to appraise the extent to which each individual student has reached mastery of the intended set of content skills through a form of writing deemed acceptable within that discipline (e.g., language, text structure, construction or argument, grammar and punctuation; Curry, Lillis, & Coffin, 2003). The main reason for which written academic tasks are assigned stems from assessment itself, as they are an opportunity in which student learning and achievement can be evaluated (Carless, 2009; Deneen & Boud, 2014). These tasks are more than just activities, however, as they are intended to help learners grapple with disciplinary content and develop transferrable skills with regards to logical reasoning, critical analysis, and communication (Curry et al., 2003; Hilgers, Hussey, & Stitt-Bergh, 1999). For both pragmatic and educational purposes in university classrooms, written academic tasks are crucial to instructors and learners alike.

Given the importance of written assessments at university, the different elements that comprise such tasks are worth analysing at a deeper level. This requires the student, lecturer, and learning environment be taken into account and, more specifically, how these different elements might serve as assets (rather than deficits) which are instrumental to assessment. According to Doyle (1983), academic tasks are an exchange between the response a student is expected to produce (e.g., original essay) and the available resources that shape how the student might obtain that answer. One might ask, then, which particular elements are likely to render a university assessment *resourceful*?

Although the relative contributions of the student, lecturer, and learning environment vary across institutions and by individual assessment, literature suggests that three particular resources are most relevant to university assessments. As presented in Figure 1, these include: (a) task resources, including clarity of task instructions and expectations

communicated by the lecturer; (b) knowledge resources, including the student's disciplinary knowledge as well as non-disciplinary (transferable) skills; and, (c) social/cultural resources, such as educational, pastoral, and sociocultural support. Improvements in each of these individualised areas are likely to impact assessment quality; moreover, systemic changes in all areas are likely to produce gains for the individual, institution, and community.

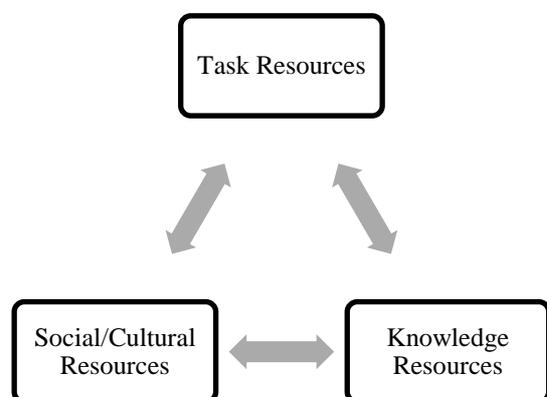


Figure 1. Primary resources relevant to university assessments

2.1.1 Task Resources

When it comes to university assessments, task-specific resources are fundamental. Academic tasks are categorised as a function of their cognitive operations, and university students may be expected to perform activities that range from memorisation (recognising or reproducing information) and routine procedures (applying a standardised, predictable formula to generate an answer) to comprehension/understanding (recognising, applying, and drawing inferences from a source) and opinionated arguments (stating a preference for something; see Doyle, 1983). Although the nature of these tasks may vary across courses and disciplines, it is the uniform clarity of operations to be performed—whether a precise answer is available and the stringency of evaluative criteria—which collectively impact a student's capacity to produce a quality answer (Doyle, 1979, 1983). Therefore, *clarity of task instructions* can determine greatly the extent to which a student will be able to make sense of the assessment and attempt to create an answer.

In theory, academic tasks that are clear and well-constructed have direct implications for assessment as they can be used as valid evidence of student achievement (Deneen & Boud, 2014). In practice, this clarity is usually subjective and as a result, instructions for academic tasks are either too vague or overly complicated. Ambiguity may be explained by a variety of factors ranging from poorly constructed prompts to inaccurate assumptions of university student knowledge and skill sets. Similarly, instructions that are laden with specific criteria can be equally overwhelming, especially for students who do not yet possess the conditional knowledge required in filtering out the most important aspects of the task.

Lecturer *expectations* of the student are conveyed through task instructions. Indeed, educational researchers (e.g., Marx & Walsh, 1988) have stated that a lecturer who fails to present clear goals and expectations for a specific task may result in unfocused activities in students, thereby creating greater variability in the cognitive operations the learners will use to answer the question. If they expect university students to achieve a common product, then lecturers must communicate the intended goals. Further, when essential information about an academic task and its related objectives are lacking, issues are likely to emerge not only with regards to an individual student's learning and task performance but also the validity of the task being measured.

2.1.2 Knowledge Resources

Student knowledge is a crucial, complex resource when regarding university-level assessment. In order for the learner to successfully complete an academic task, they must not only understand the task requirements but also possess and demonstrate discipline-specific skill according to standards as established by the lecturer. Assessments may require a variety of skills calling for declarative knowledge (e.g., facts) to procedural and conditional knowledge (e.g., applied transfer of those facts to specific situations; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2016). Their complexity is further shaped by prior educational and historical experiences that each learner brings to the classroom. For instance, imagine an academic task in which a first-year student is expected to compose a geography essay that describes forces that control Earth systems. The student must first possess a foundational understanding of environmental processes (e.g., photosynthesis or atmospheric systems), and the lecturer may assume that all students have already mastered these concepts in secondary school. The student must also possess more advanced understanding of geography-specific topics discussed in the course itself (e.g., fluvial, coastal, and terrestrial landscapes). If a student lacks prior training in a certain discipline, then he will likely struggle with university assessments because the gap between his current knowledge and the level required for task competence may be too large.

Discipline-specific skill is not the only form of knowledge required for university assessments. In many cases, the student's transferrable skills reign supreme. For written academic tasks, learners must be able to *do* something with the knowledge they master. According to Bennett, Dunne, and Carré (1999), transferrable skills are competencies viewed in different groupings such as management of self (e.g., manage time effectively, set objectives and priorities, employ critical thinking), information (use appropriate sources, respond to different purposes and audiences), and task (identify key features, conceptualise issues, identify strategic options, assess outcomes). Self-management competence might require the student to manage time and avoid procrastination so the learning and thinking process can take place without impediments. Information-related competence might require the student to seek outside academic sources through library and technology systems. Task-related competence might require the student to interpret the question effectively, organise and formulate a logical response to the question at hand, and to communicate that response in writing.

Importantly, discipline-specific and transferrable skills are not mutually exclusive. As described by Barrie (2004), transferrable skills develop in various disciplinary contexts and are outcomes that in some way transcend disciplinary outcomes. Transferrable skills may ultimately influence a student's assessment fate, as they represent the extent to which she can formulate and present a response to the question(s) being asked. Thus in many cases, regardless of his depth of knowledge on a subject, a university student who is unable to fulfil the expected requirements of a task will fail to receive full marks. Indeed, research has shown that transferrable skills have a significant impact on university student outcomes. A meta-analysis by Robbins et al. (2004) reported a moderate correlation ($\rho = .37$) between university retention and academic-related skills (e.g., time management, use of information resources, and communication with lecturers). There is also growing acceptance that these skills help students to accomplish academic and occupational goals upon graduation (Bennett et al., 1999; Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteché, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010; Kember & McNaught, 2007). As a result, researchers have emphasised the importance of fostering a set of transferrable skills in tertiary education as the integration of non-disciplinary skills within a discipline-specific genre is a valuable knowledge resource that best prepares a student for success on university assessments (Bennett et al., 1999; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010).

2.1.3 Social and Cultural Resources

In many cases, success with university assessment is likely to be a product not only of the task as assigned by the lecturer and the knowledge cultivated within the learner, but also the social and cultural resources of support that help the task and knowledge come into fruition. Such resources include general services (e.g., academic skills, pastoral care, library, etc.) and cohort-specific services (e.g., disability resources, international student groups, cultural development teams, etc.) as provided by the university. Researchers (e.g., Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby, & Zepke, 2004) have evaluated the impact of institutional support on student outcomes in New Zealand and conclude that comprehensive, well-designed support services can positively contribute to student retention and course completion rates. Such resources may be especially important for individuals who lack an academic support network outside of the university context, including students who are first-in-family or those from underprivileged educational backgrounds. For all students, however, these resources influence student outcomes in powerful ways (e.g., Bahr, 2008; Bettinger et al., 2013), and are therefore a valuable component in terms of assessment.

Within the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand it is important for universities to acknowledge that they are largely set up and organised from a Pākehā, Western worldview. This cultural influence is reflected in the type and format of assessments, and may disadvantage students from different cultural backgrounds. It thus behooves universities to accommodate learners from different cultures to provide them with opportunities to show their full academic potential. This can be achieved through dedicated support staff and support units for learners (e.g. Taipapaki Curtis et al., 2012) or by changing the format of an assessment to a form that is more culturally appropriate. For example, in Chu, Samala Abella, and Paurini (2013) the authors note that Pacific students reported that academic tasks are a challenge for several reasons, including the attitude that writing is a Western form of assessment and students would prefer assessments that utilise their oratory skills. Thus, having social and cultural resources available to students is a crucial part of navigating university assessments.

2.2 Assessment for First-Year University Students

Although a struggle with assessment can occur at any time in one's academic career, most students have a difficult time during the transition from secondary school to university (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Hillman, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Taylor, 2008). In their first year, university students must not only meet the criteria involved in each isolated academic task but also cope with a broader series of acculturative shifts in how learning takes place and for novel settings. A transition for first-year university students is not always linear (Perna, 2006; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012) and therefore multiple iterations, revisions, and accommodated thinking processes are likely to take place. Further, this transition may take longer time than typically believed by researchers, thus requiring repeated efforts to support student needs (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Task, knowledge, and social/cultural resources therefore have important implications for helping first-year students identify and address important assessment-related concerns. When these concerns preclude a student from accessing valuable resources, students may become vulnerable to reduced motivation and performance outcomes (Clark, 2005; Harlen, 2006). Meanwhile, students may also develop perceptions and anxieties about assessment (e.g., Sotardi, 2011; Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005).

Task, knowledge, and social/cultural resources accessible to a first-year university student are likely to greatly determine her ability to understand, generate and communicate a thoughtful response to an academic task. This assumption elicits some key questions posed by first-year students.

2.2.1 Task Resources: What am I supposed to do?

As described, clarity of task instructions and expectations conveyed by the lecturer are crucial for students to accurately interpret and complete an academic task. First-year students may be more likely to struggle with these two elements than more experienced students for a variety of reasons. Contemporary research in tertiary education (e.g., Armstrong & Sanson, 2012; Hendry & Jukic, 2014) has demonstrated that many students—particularly in the transition from secondary school to first-year university—struggle to understand the quality of work that lecturers expect. For instance, incoming students often fail to comprehend which writing requirements are necessary due to bewildering terminology used in task instructions that have a specific academic meaning that students are not familiar with (e.g., “be explicit,” “make an argument,” “cite authorities,” “critique,” and “compare and contrast”; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Researchers (e.g., Carless, 2009) agree that demystifying the university assessment process for students (e.g., explaining criteria and describing the marking process) is critical and can lead to positive achievement outcomes; moreover, failure to find time for this dialogue can lead to negative consequences (Yorke, 2001).

During the transition from secondary school, the deliberate search for and attainment of task resources may be influenced by actual and perceived constraints. For example, the physical and psychosocial learning environments at university change dramatically from most secondary schools. Within expansive lecture halls, transitioning students may hesitate to speak up and ask questions about assessment details. In certain courses, students may not know where to go for help if there is a large teaching team comprising course coordinators, lecturers, teaching assistants, and tutors. Generally, first-year students may also struggle with their assessments because of unclear or conflicting expectations (McInnis, 2000; Yorke & Longden, 2008). For example, transitioning students may not fully ascertain the role of independence at university. Some may acknowledge that university requires them to be responsible for their own actions (which is generally true); however, students may not yet realise that this responsibility and independence call for help-seeking, collaborative strategies (e.g., asking questions for clarity, searching for more information, and asking others for support). Research has shown that before their transition, many students have a difficult time envisioning university life and accurately predicting their experiences (Briggs et al., 2012). Many factors are at play, including different assessments used in secondary school (e.g., given second chances, more lenient classroom rubrics, quick feedback on returned work; Brinkworth et al., 2009; Guskey, 2006), and individual expectations for and attitudes toward assessments (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, & McKenzie, 2009).

Not surprisingly, students who perceive similarities in pedagogical practices, knowledge, and workload between their secondary and tertiary environments are likely to be more successful during the transition to university (Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2010). In New Zealand, however, the transition from secondary school to university appears especially challenging. Vlaardingerbroek (2006) has commented that New Zealand students experience redefined university entrance requirements, changing curricular delivery, and unclear assessment modules in use which may influence their academic performance and preparation for university study. Therefore, even dedicated students who have seemingly mastered course content may struggle in understanding what is expected of them for their assessment.

2.2.2 Knowledge Resources: What do I need to *understand*?

The extent to which transitioning students have gained scholarly skills in preparation for university (e.g., exposure to academic literature, essay writing, time management, critical thinking, etc.) is likely to impact their attitudes toward and engagement with assessments (Hooker & Brand, 2010). When students begin their first year at university, they are often required to reorganise the way they think about themselves as learners (Huon & Sankey,

2002), a cognitively and emotionally demanding feat likely to impact how they approach academic tasks. This adjustment includes making comparisons between secondary and university experiences (Perry & Allard, 2009), for example, in terms of disciplinary and non-disciplinary skills, rigour and expectations, and assessment methods. This transition may be best illustrated when first-year university students ask their lecturers, “Do I need to know this?” Although this is among the most frustrating questions received by lecturers, such an inquiry may actually be an effort for the transitioning student to be proactive in identifying and organising key information needed for assessments. In some circumstances, these kinds of questions may reflect emerging transferrable skills. These skills are crucial for first-year students, as researchers (e.g., Jansen & Suhre, 2010) have showed that perceived time management and learning skills are likely to have a positive impact on motivation, study behaviour, and academic achievement while also reducing academic stress.

2.2.3 Social & Cultural Resources: *Where do I go when...?*

Successful first-year students are likely to thrive when (a) they have access to social and cultural resources, and (b) they know how to make good use of those support systems. The culture of a university comprises a unique combination of knowledge, attitudes, traditions, and values guiding the behaviour of those in the academic community (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993); however, navigating these climates can sometimes be daunting for transitioning students. Problems with written assessments may therefore emerge when individuals fail to utilise appropriate social and cultural resources as they attempt to integrate themselves into the university ideology. Knowing where to go for assistance is especially important for first-year students from minority backgrounds as huge differences may exist on the basis of their prior learning environments and that of university. Lillis and Turner (2001) state that important transferrable skills (such as communication) are highly valued at university and have direct implications for performance; however, these skills are often embedded within a specific sociocultural perspective. Indeed, each university has its own distinct social, historical, and cultural context into which students must be integrated if they are to obtain maximum benefit from the learning experience (Tinto, 1997). Briggs et al. (2012) observe that for students, the decision to attend university is a personal investment of cultural capital that is accrued through education. For some, however, the move to university is also a significant social displacement which may be intensified where the individual is learning to speak the majority language, is from an ethnic group that is under-represented in the university population, or requires special accommodations.

One of the major conclusions of research in tertiary education is that diversity enriches the academic and social experience (Pascarella, 2006). New Zealand universities are increasingly diverse in their student populations, and several institutions across the North Island and South Island have placed considerable value on the encouragement of ethnic minorities and overseas students to pursue a tertiary-level qualification (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; James & Watt, 1992). Creating and fostering a learning environment in which each individual's culture is acknowledged, respected, and bias removed (MacFarlane, 2010) are crucial not only to build a community of learners (and teachers), but also a community of people.

An apparent trend across New Zealand universities is the rising demand for student assistance from academic support units to meet these diverse needs. At the University of Canterbury, for example, the Academic Skills Centre sees roughly a quarter of the student population on an annual basis. Other institution-wide support units, such as Disability Resource Service and Māori and Pacific Development Teams, have also reported increased requests for student assistance. It should be noted that this increase is a national trend, and is independent from the expected increase in support needs as a result of the Canterbury Earthquake Sequence; Allardyce (2013, personal communication). Support units are especially valuable for first-year students as they transition from secondary school to

university, and researchers have documented the positive impact of these services on course success and academic achievement in tertiary education (Bahr, 2008; Bettinger et al., 2013).

3. Interview participants

Our primary participants in this study are the staff in the student support units. These staff work directly with students on a daily basis on all manners of student issues, academic and pastoral. We invited them to participate in a semi-structured interview based on three questions:

1. What in your view are the most common issues students have with assessment, in particular in first year?
2. What in your view are the underlying causes for these issues?
3. What can we (lecturers, support staff, the university in its processes and regulations) do to alleviate those issues?

Participants were drawn from the units listed in Table 1. In addition, one colleague with a liaison role in the Library (which was not on our list of units to contact) volunteered to be interviewed as well upon hearing about the project. We focused on support staff rather than students because support staff have a broader and more longitudinal view of student issues with assessment across the university, and are thus able to provide more rounded, complete, nuanced and higher resolution data.

Table 1: Participants from the different student support units

Support unit	Staff interviewed (total in unit)*
Academic Skills Centre	10 (13)
Student Development	3 (5)
Disability Resource Service	1 (4)
Māori Development Team	4 (4)
Pacific Development Team	4 (5)
Library	1 (n/a)

* : May include casual and/or part-time staff

Below, we briefly introduce the roles of the individual units within the University of Canterbury.

Academic Skills Centre

The Academic Skills Centre provides advice, support, and resources to students in academic matters, with a focus on academic writing and study strategies. Students can sign up for workshops or can meet with learning advisors individually.

Student Development

Student Development provides general student support, and is often the first point of contact for students and staff concerned about students. The focus is on promoting personal wellbeing, developing general skills for success at university, helping students understand university processes, and referring students to more specialist support (e.g. the Health Centre).

Disability Resource Service

The Disability Resource Service provides individualised, disability-specific support for students, such as assistive technologies, interpreters, and note takers. In addition the DRS

creates alternative formats for assessments (e.g. braille), and provides special arrangements for exams.

Māori Development Team

The Māori Development Team provides developmental and support initiatives to enhance the Māori student experience. It organises the Māori orientation for new to UC students and provides advisor appointments and mentoring support for Māori students. It also works closely with the Academic Skills Centre to provide academic support for Māori students.

Pacific Development Team

The Pacific Development Team has responsibilities similar to the Māori Development Team, but geared toward the Pasifika population.

Each unit has its own team leader, with overall line management responsibility lying with the Student Success Manager. The exception is the Māori Development Team, which reports to the Assistant Vice-Chancellor, Māori.

3.1 Analysis

Interviews were held at a time and place convenient for the participant. We aimed to conduct as many interviews as possible in the term break, when student demand for support is lower than during term time. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were audio recorded. In many cases field notes were also taken to complement the audio or to expand an idea that was not germane for the research questions for this study, but a potentially interesting avenue of collaboration in the future. The interviews were replayed and more detailed notes were made to identify themes and lines of inquiry. We did not produce full written transcripts as these were not necessary to answer the research questions. We are confident that we reached data saturation, as the later interviews largely reinforced themes that had already been uncovered.

4. Results and Discussion

Interviews with support staff members provided us with valuable insight into the common problems that first-year students face in terms of assessment, likely causes of those problems, and guidelines for improved university practice. Historical data in the form of anonymous student appointment records database from the Academic Skills Centre were also analysed to gain a better understanding of the specific kinds of assessment-related inquiries that first-year university students tend to bring to learning advisors for guidance and support. Integrating these data sources, five broad themes about first-year students and assessment were identified. Each theme is presented below, including representative examples as extracted from the collected data.

4.1 Theme One: Assessment Shift from High School is Abrupt, Unclear, and Substantial

Interview data report that first-year students tend to struggle with assessments due to large discrepancies in the academic tasks used in high school when compared to university. Among the most commonly referenced problems are recognisable differences in **assessment methods** between secondary and tertiary classrooms. Depending on the particular high school, the ways in which assessments are designed, what they intend to measure, and how they are implemented may be qualitatively and quantitatively different from those at university. Support staff interviews highlight that certain assessment methods are regularly practiced in high school while rarely applied in university; thus, a rapid adjustment may be burdensome on transitioning students if they realise “the game has changed.” A clear example is the opportunity for students to re-submit written work for an

improved mark—a commonly used method in high school classrooms. Although this approach may be a way for students to learn from mistakes and “redeem themselves” academically, this is a rare circumstance in university assessments. This discrepancy may be due to several reasons. Some lecturers may hold a firm attitude that university is “the real world” where individuals must produce quality work on the first attempt. This may also be pragmatic, as many 100-level course curricula are packed with content that cannot allow for slowed progression. In addition to task resubmissions, the level of feedback provided to students also seems to be quite divergent from high school. Interviews support that many secondary teachers dedicate substantial time in providing their students with suggestions for improvement. This is less often the case for university assessments, as lecturers may not have the time and/or staffing to provide a class of hundreds with the same degree of individualised feedback.

Another commonly reported assessment problem among first-year students is an **unrealistic or inaccurate expectation about university**. Based on the interview data, this includes general misperceptions of what being a full-time study might demand of the learner and which skills are needed for success on academic tasks. Part of these seems to emanate from a lack of communication from high schools as well as insufficient clarity from the tertiary institution in its recruitment efforts and orientations. Several participants commented that National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) standards and qualifications may further contribute to the ambiguity in transitioning students. For example, a student may have received an “achieved” for a particular standard (the lowest passing level) in high school, an outcome that might erroneously suggest that he or she is prepared for university-level study in that topic (see also Themes 2 and 3). Recent changes to the definition of University Entrance and frequent changes to additional university admission criteria for various programmes may further affect the expectations of what university study, and university assessments, will entail.

It appears as though first-year students are aware—albeit vague—that university will be different from high school; however, they may not understand *what* those differences might be and *to what extent* these differences will likely necessitate change within the student. If transitioning students lack certainty, then they may rely on formative educational experiences and attempt to transfer assessment approaches that may have worked for them in the past (e.g., waiting to the last minute to begin a task, asking for deadline extensions, receiving substantial guidance from the teacher, etc.). For some, these unrealistic or inaccurate expectations may quickly lead to frustration or disappointment. As levels of assessment anxiety may rise in first-year students, it is therefore a responsibility of the tertiary institution to convey transparent, honest, and realistic messages to prospective and new students about what they are expected to do at university.

Lastly, interview data suggest that the **level of thinking** that university students will need to perform on academic tasks is more advanced than in high school. Support staff members commented that many high school assessments appear to provide students with a textbook or set of sources that simply require the student to transmit facts. As expressed in one interview, “There is an important difference between learning and being taught.” Rather than “spoon-feeding” learners, university assessments may require a student to locate information sources, judge the quality and legitimacy of those sources and their associated claims, and integrate how each source contributes to a bigger, overall argument. Each of these operations calls for a set of discipline and transferrable skills (see Themes 2 and 3) for university students to be successful on assessments.

4.2 Theme Two: Lack of Transferrable Skills

Interview data suggest that many first-year students are in great need of transferable skills for academic achievement with university assessments. Generally, transferrable skills

comprised poor or weak understanding of **how to learn**; for instance, students frequently struggle with reading and remembering academic text, identifying and extracting important details from a large set of information (e.g., textbook or lecture), and applying theories or ideas to closely related situations. These skills are crucial, as students who lack self-awareness as a learner are also likely to face difficulties with assessments. As expressed by a support staff member, “If [students] don’t know what they don’t know, they can’t go looking for answers.” Several support staff members agreed that students must develop these skills from a young age, as understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses as a learner is an instrumental, metacognitive competency that fuels motivation and performance at university.

A related issue with regards to assessment and transferrable skills is the limited degree to which first-year students understand what it means to be an **independent, self-regulated learner**. Interviews suggest that many students struggle with assessments because they do not yet appear responsible for their own learning. Whereas staff members agreed that independent, self-regulated learning is a desirable skill to have at university; students may not fully understand what such actions actually entail. For example, a few support staff members commented that many first-year students know the *importance* of independent learning and are quite *keen* to find out ways to develop and improve; however, students may equate “independent” learning to working alone. If they do not know how to learn or what academics mean by independent learning, then students are more likely to struggle and less likely to seek resources for help. This situation may put individuals at risk for lower learning and assessment outcomes.

On a corollary note, it was reported that many first-year students lack **effective help-seeking strategies** for university assessments. For example, students may not yet “know how to ask questions,” suggesting that the first-year assessment transition not only includes different kinds of tasks (Theme 1) and levels of disciplinary-specific content (Theme 3) but also fundamental processes of inquiry that individuals may not have developed fully in high school. Whereas there are individual differences in one’s likelihood to seek out assistance from academic or support staff (e.g., shyness, insecurity, or language and communication barriers), how each student perceives the learning environment was reported as a factor that shapes the degree to which he or she feels comfortable asking questions and seeking assistance about university assessments (see Theme 5).

Another commonly reported assessment problem among first-year students focused on **time management**. Time management is a typical challenge for transitioning students, as freedom also calls for greater responsibility and self-regulation. Specific time management issues that first-year students face include difficulty with prioritising and planning task responsibilities, setting and following through on short- and long-term goals, and balancing schoolwork with home, part-time work, and whānau commitments. In several interviews, staff commented that first-year students tend to struggle with estimating how much time it will take to complete an assessment at university and, as a result, they tend to procrastinate until the deadline is near. Further, it was noted that time management is often a challenge for Māori and Pasifika first-year students, as they are likely to have many group responsibilities (e.g., family and church) that may conflict with or take priority over an individual student’s academic duties.

First-year students’ emergent transferrable skills are further illustrated in the kinds of queries they bring to the institution’s learning advisors. For this project, historical data were analysed from an internal database within the University of Canterbury’s Academic Skills Centre, comprising all student consultation case notes (as categorised and maintained by learning advisors). In 2015, more than one-third of all student requests for support were launched from 100-level students ($n = 927$), ranging across all academic disciplines. The primary issue that each student consultation addressed was grouped by the learning advisor using predetermined categories, and the most frequently reported issue among first-year students

was a general critique of written work (49.5%). Here, “critique of work” typically represented academic writing concerns such as (a) whether or not the student was answering the question, (b) if there was sufficient clarity in the attempted answers, and (c) the extent to which the ideas “flowed” within the written text. Consultations also involved regular requests for guidance with assessment planning (21.3%), wherein the student and learning advisor confirm academic task requirements and discuss possible ways to approach the assessment. Other consultations included a primary focus on grammar (12.9%), referencing (6.4%), and general study skills (5.5%). Although these descriptive data do not capture the overlapping nature of secondary issues regularly addressed in student consultations for a self-selected group of individuals (i.e., proactive students are more likely than struggling students to seek guidance from a learning advisor), this information underscores the value of transferrable skills and the related problems that 100-level students encounter with regards to university assessments. Linking this data with the support staff interviews, it appears as though first-year students may acknowledge that they need help with their assessments, but are not yet proficient with (a) translating academic task instructions into a specific, achievable plan; and, (b) troubleshooting and proofreading their own written work.

4.3 Theme Three: Weak or Inadequate Discipline-Specific Skills

First-year students appear to struggle with university assessments because they consistently lack discipline-specific skills that are needed for achievement on 100-level course tasks. Several support staff members commented that many students enter university without having taken **appropriate coursework** in high school. For example, a first-year student might enrol in engineering courses out of interest; however, lacking any experience with calculus or physics will put the student at a disadvantage from the first day of classes. Valuable knowledge resources are crucial for success on assessments.

As expressed in the interviews, students may not even realize that they are already behind in course content until after the course has begun. This can lead to major problems, not only with assessments, but also student motivation and achievement. Lacking discipline-specific skills is likely to arise if the tertiary institution does not have comprehensive enrolment alerts that brings staff to their attention that students are attempting to enrol in 100-level courses without having the appropriate prerequisites from high school. Without these systems in effect, there may be a burden on the individual student, other learners, and the lecturer.

4.4 Theme 4: Assessment Design Issues

Consistent with the literature review, first-year university students are likely to struggle with assessments when critical task resources are lacking. For example, interviews documented that **poorly written or ambiguous instructions** can quickly lead to frustration. Specifically, lecturers may present ill-defined expectations of what the assessment is intended to measure and how it should be carried out by the student. As one interviewee commented, “You need a good question to get a good answer.” Such ambiguity was identified as rooted in a host of systemic flaws, such as a vague course description or syllabus (wherein the student does not know in advance what assessments will be required before enrolling), or disconnect between an academic task and the course’s learning objectives. Further, unclear instructions may also emerge if the individual lecturer perceives an academic task as “busy work” or is unfamiliar with appropriate assessment terminology (e.g., report vs. essay, “discuss” vs. “analyse”). During staff interviews, poorly written or ambiguous instructions were often attributed to a lack of teaching preparation amongst university lecturers. Comments also highlighted the need for collaborative involvement with support teams before an assessment takes place.

Instructions are crucial for students to be successful with assessments; however, problems appear to arise when instructions either **lack enough information** for the student to fully

understand task criteria or, alternatively, **provide too much information** so the student is overwhelmed with details. During staff interviews, it was noted that first-year university students struggle with assessments when task instructions include only one or two sentences for a 3,000-word assignment or—at the other end of the spectrum—multiple pages of instructions for a 500-word response. Other issues arise when instructions do not provide students with access to additional resources that are necessary for assessment completion (e.g., scanned readings, links to Full Text articles, etc.), or fail to present students with clear information on how their work will be marked. As expressed by one support staff member, “There is a responsibility for the university to help students establish critical skills, and this requires pre-planned and intentional management, not through sheer luck.”

More generally, assessment problems also arise when there is **limited inclusiveness** in an academic task’s scope and implementation. For example, instructions and assessment criteria were reported as sometimes unfair to distance learners, as certain tasks might be difficult or impossible for individuals to perform successfully. There was also concern with regards to the design of university assessments for those with physical and/or psychological difficulties, as conflicting practices in formal examinations (e.g., inconsistently allowing students with a diagnosed learning disability to use spell checker on written exams) as well as lacking universal design in terms of accessibility may be especially distressing for first-year students.

Also with regards to inclusion, assessment problems may arise if the design of an academic task is viewed by the student as **mono-cultural** and seems incompatible with diverse types of knowledge. It was commented by several staff members that first-year students—especially those from Māori and Pasifika traditions—may struggle with assessments that fail to capture a variety of skills, such as relational knowledge and oral communication. As discussed during interviews, such a mono-cultural approach to assessment may be due to a lecturer’s (or department’s) lack of knowledge or experience with bicultural competencies. Although these sensitive inclusive issues are relevant across the years of university study, they are valuable in identifying some of the common struggles first-year students tend to face.

4.5 Theme 5: Unsupportive Learning Climate

Another important theme identified in the interviews was the importance of a supportive learning environment for first-year university assessments. Staff members frequently stated that transitioning students tend to struggle with university assessments because they (the learners) **do not feel comfortable** asking the lecturer for clarity. This apprehension may be due to typical issues such as the appropriateness of asking questions in a large lecture hall while feeling like a “little fish in a big pond”; however, the connection between the lecturer and students has emerged as especially important for first-year assessments. Support staff members commented that some 100-level lecturers lack warmth and compassion, and do not try to understand the difficulties that first-year students may have outside of academia, whereas others are quite effective in showing sensitivity to student concerns and reducing the power differentials between the expert and the novice. Other issues include a general lack of equity/fairness in the classroom, and certain individuals make it especially difficult for students to access them (i.e., no office hours or are not responsive to email or phone). This issue becomes clear: “Pastoral care is often forgotten in academic staff as it tends to be viewed as ‘housed’ in a different area. When the student doesn’t feel supported by the lecturer, bigger [assessment] issues tend to arise.” As commented by different staff member, “Lecturers don’t necessarily need to dumb things down or lower their expectations. They just need to understand their students, provide them with task clarity and [...] accessibility for support, so students can meet those expectations.” At the same time, lecturers also may feel

ill equipped or prepared to deal with pastoral care issues in students, as this generally tends to be outside of their area of expertise.

In addition to warmth and accessibility, interviews highlighted that first-year students often **lack information about university processes and procedures**, especially when they need academic-related support and guidance. According to support staff members, transitioning students may struggle with understanding the enrolment process (e.g., which courses to take and how to enrol) and university procedures (e.g., Aegrotat), as well as identifying teams for academic and pastoral care. First-year students are infrequently referred from lecturers to support teams, which may lead to individual issues with assessment and course performance. Demystifying university processes that are relevant to assessments is a vital part of success in first-year students, especially for those who may experience a more challenging transition than others.

5. Recommendations for practice

This project highlights common problems that first-year New Zealand university students encounter with regards to assessment. Rooted in theoretical and empirical underpinnings, the current findings present five primary themes that are likely to contribute to first-year students' experiences with university assessments. While somewhat diverse in nature, the themes create individual and systemic opportunities for educational growth and improvement. Figure 2 (below) presents our current thinking on the student, lecturer, support staff and institutional processes that should be considered as ways to improve university assessment practices for first-year students.



Figure 2. Primary factors that contribute to first-year students' experience with university assessments

We asked participants to recommend how to mitigate the identified student assessment problems and/or likely causes. The aim of such inquiry was to employ the expertise of support staff while ensuring that recommendations to improve university assessments would be valid, reliable, and equitable. Thus, we present a variety of suggestions through a pan-university lens based on the collected data. Here, we group these recommendations by (primary) actor: teaching staff, support staff, and university processes. Three key themes are apparent throughout, namely **information, communication, and integration**.

5.1. Recommendations for teaching staff

To reduce the occurrence of first-year student problems with regards to assessments, one proposed recommendation is that university teaching staff receive more training in terms of NCEA processes and procedures so as to develop critical transparency for assessments. Consistent with tertiary institutions across New Zealand, a large fraction of teaching staff at the University of Canterbury is from overseas and, as such, are likely to have limited knowledge of the New Zealand secondary school system and NCEA requirements. Moreover, support staff noted that even university staff (academic or professional) who have children in the secondary school age range may not necessarily understand the NCEA system. As a result, there is potential disconnect between the expected and actual student knowledge and skills which can be reduced through communication. Support staff explicitly recommended that lecturers and departments become more familiar with the NCEA system, not only in terms of depth and breadth of topics covered, but also in terms of its assessment structure. Many students come to university expecting a certain structure (e.g. the ability to re-sit assessments), only to discover such a structure no longer applies. The support staff at the University of Canterbury recommended involving our School of Teacher Education in the College of Education to help staff across the institution become more familiar with the NCEA system. A similar approach, *mutatis mutandis*, might apply for other institutions.

First-year students often find themselves in high-enrolment courses, a marked contrast with the small classes in secondary school. Support staff noted that it was easy for students to get lost in the system. Support staff reported students being unsure who to ask or who to contact in case of issues, an effect likely compounded by the practice in several departments of having multiple lecturers (sometimes as many as five) teach into a single course. It was recommended that in large courses, there always be a clearly identified contact person who comes to the classes and/or teaches regularly.

In terms of assessments, support staff noted that it is important for students to become aware what is expected of them and what they will be held accountable for. Ensuring that a task is understandable for a student is crucial. However, there is a fine line between appropriate scaffolding of a task (definition of terms, availability of resources, etc.), and providing so many instructions that the students are overwhelmed (e.g. a five-page instruction for a 500-word essay). Support staff recommended closer collaboration between academics and support staff (in particular the institution's learning advisors) to ensure that assessments are clear to students, to share assessment instructions with academic colleagues within their respective departments for a "sanity check", and to provide no more than two pages of instructions. They noted that assessments should be equitable for on-campus and distance students. They also recommended making rubrics or marking schedules available, so students can develop a good understanding of the assessment criteria. Last, they recommended the availability of exemplars for written work; however, rather than to give students a framework to replicate without deliberate thought, it was suggested that students receive good, mediocre, and poor exemplars and giving them the opportunity to self-regulate and discern for themselves what might constitute a good quality submission.

With regards to the classroom climate, support staff recommended a deeper understanding of students' social and cultural backgrounds, and how those influence assessment (e.g., group work versus individual assessment). In particular, they mentioned the power distance between lecturers and students, which sometimes inhibits students to seek out assistance. This could be mediated through a variety of ways, for example, by lecturers sharing their own experiences as learners, having designated office hours for the class or other clearly indicated means of contact, and approaching students based on their strengths, rather than their deficits. Constructive and ample feedback, both formative and summative, is crucial in this process, with feedback not limited to what students did not do so well, but also what and how they did well (e.g., a student who got an A for an assignment still needs to know what

led to that success, in particular with essay-type assessments). Lecturers were also encouraged to seek feedback from the students to inform their teaching practice.

5.2. Recommendations for support staff

Support staff have a crucial role at the university, which extends beyond providing front line academic and pastoral support. In fact, student support starts at secondary school, through an institution's liaison officers. Several of the support staff mentioned that students during the first-year transition would likely contact the liaison person (who had come to their school the year before) for assistance. They recommended more and closer collaboration between student liaison, academic advisors in the Colleges and academic units so that secondary students receive consistent, simultaneous advice not only about studying at the university in general, but also discipline-specific advice. The aim is to demystify university studies for both secondary students and their families so they have a clear understanding of what it means to study a particular subject at university, what full-time study entails, what the expectations and requirements are, and how to best prepare for university studies. Engagement with the wider community and whānau is important not just to convey that the university wants to be part of these communities. It is equally important to convey that the university is a community itself, and as such, has legitimate community demands on students. Learning is not achieved in isolation; therefore, students as well as teaching staff rely on one another to contribute to the community of learning.

Support staff also called for more active outreach to lecturers to collaborate on providing pastoral support for students. They noted that many lecturers do not necessarily see pastoral support as their responsibility, nor do they (the teaching staff) necessarily feel comfortable or qualified to do this. Many lecturers *do* notice students who are having issues, but do not necessarily know how to assist them or where to refer the student. A single system by which teaching staff can alert the support staff of student concerns was recommended.

In a similar vein, support staff often note student issues with academic work. They commented that currently they do not have a clear line of communication back to the lecturers. They also were not certain that such feedback from professional staff to academic staff would always be appreciated, in particular when they notice students struggle with assignments that are unclear. However, they noted that one unclear assignment in a high enrolment course could lead to a significant fraction of the students in the course seeking assistance, placing a burden on the support staff's time and resources. Clearer procedures and lines of communication for support staff to signal student issues with academic work to the teaching staff are needed.

5.3. Recommendations for university processes

Virtually all support staff called for more information, communication and integration of knowledge about students. An integrated early-alert system was mentioned as a highly useful tool to have. In such a system, teaching and support staff can flag student issues or students they consider being at risk, with the system then evaluating the risk and initiating an action (e.g. notifying a support staff member to follow up with the student).

Support staff also mentioned the system of formal course prerequisites and that these need to be more carefully set and enforced, coupled with strong academic advice for students. It might also be helpful for teaching staff to assess what transferrable skills will be required in a course and communicate that to students in the course outlines. The above is of particular importance for those who have enrolled in the university via the special admissions process for students aged 20 and over.

Raising student awareness of what it means to engage in university-level study and the institution's academic processes was mentioned as well. It was suggested that the student orientation period be extended to better familiarise students with the university environment. In particular, support staff mentioned the processes and timelines the university has in place for withdrawing from courses, alternative assessments, and aegrotats as being unclear to students. Some support staff recommended creating a Uni101 optional undergraduate seminar course to help them build and strengthen transferrable skills, in particular around academic writing, learning to learn, and time management.

Interviewed staff also called for more support for lecturers and tutors to develop their teaching. They noted that teaching staff are typically hired because of their content expertise, not for their qualities as a teacher, designer of curriculum and assessments, provider of constructive feedback, or pastoral support. They advocated the university provide more opportunities for staff with respect to academic development.

With regards to policy and practices, support staff noted that there must be consistent rules, guidelines and practices across the university with regards to extensions, special accommodations, and weighting of assessments (i.e., a 3,000-word essay can be worth 10% of the final mark in one course, whereas a similar size assessment might be worth 40% in another). They cautioned against both too few and too many assessments in a course. The former creates a lot of pressure on students, while the latter may disproportionately increase the workload. All called for a brief assessment early in a course, primarily as a check on student engagement (as part of the early-alert system).

Staff also advocated the use of universal design principles and consistent use of templates so that course information and assessments are clear to students, and are accessible by students with a wide variety of abilities and needs.

6. Project impacts

6.1 Impact on learners and practitioners

At its core this project was a stocktake, followed by recommendations for changes in practice. The ultimate reach of the project in terms of changed practices is difficult to predict. The project team's goal is to reach the entire university student and teaching staff population over time. However, this is an organic process through regulation and policy changes, coupled with academic development for teaching staff. In the years to come, we expect to see the effects of the implementation of the recommendations, leading to fewer students needing to seek advice from the support units while maintaining, or even improving, academic performance, progression and retention.

6.2 Impact on the project team

The project team consists of representatives (team leaders) of all units directly involved in student academic support and academic staff teaching support. It is expected that this project will serve as a further catalyst to increase collaboration between the units to improve the student (academic) experience and success at the university.

The project has been an empowering experience for support staff. Often, they have felt silo'd within their individual units, and valued the opportunity to voice the issues that are normally contained within the individual support units, and appreciated the project team drawing on their experience and expertise to help solve the issues and offer suggestions to the university at large.

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